

Take a long hard look at yourself

Tony Blair must listen to the voters and step down sooner rather than later

Robin Cook

The Guardian, Saturday May 7, 2005

It is rather odd for Tony Blair to respond to the election results by spending the weekend reshuffling the jobs of everyone else. A more fitting response might have been to take time out to reflect on the implications of the result for how long he stays in his own job.

In any such reflection, he could put down on the positive side of the balance sheet his historic achievements in remoulding the Labour party into the natural party of government. There is much satisfaction to be gained from looking back on a unique record of three victories in a row for Labour.

But he must also be more candid with himself about the qualified character of the latest victory than some of his closest allies were being with the nation yesterday. Labour won the first two landslides partly because of Tony Blair's popular appeal. This time Tony Blair was elected because the Labour government was more popular than he is. If he wishes to be remembered for his electoral success, he might be sensible to stand down before the next public test of his popularity in ballots to local councils, to devolved bodies or on a European referendum.

There are three pointed questions which Tony Blair needs to weigh as a result of election night.

The first is whether his style of personal government can operate successfully in a parliament with such a sharply reduced majority. A number of his circle were yesterday ascertaining that a lower majority increases pressure on Labour MPs to behave responsibly. There is some truth in that claim, but we are in for a bumpy ride if they do not recognise that the other part of the bargain is that leadership must also behave with greater responsibility in fostering a more consensual, collegiate culture than in the past.

Tony Blair needs to reflect on whether he can successfully modify his way of working and cut with the grain of the values, ethos and priorities of the Labour party. That will mean overcoming his habit of demonstrating leadership by flamboyant initiatives such as tuition fees, and then challenging Labour MPs to swallow their principles and back his convictions. An early test of his ability to reconcile himself to the new reality will be whether the reshuffle, when completed, reflects the broad church of the Labour party. Tony Blair will need to acquire the skills of Harold Wilson and Jim Callaghan in constructing a balanced ministerial team that commands support in all sections of the Labour party, and not just from loyalists.

The next question he should consider is whether he can swivel his political strategy through 180 degrees to focus on the pressing new electoral competition from the Liberal Democrats. Until now, Tony Blair's single-minded calculation has been that the only electoral fight that matters is between Labour and the Tories for the centre ground. He has, therefore, marshalled his troops to face to the right and to compete for traditional Tory territory.

The problem is that, this time, Labour voters defected en masse not to the Tories, but to the Lib Dems, who are repeatedly identified in the polls as being to the left of New Labour. There is a lot wrong with that populist perception, but we will not halt the seepage of votes by struggling to expose the reactionary side of the Lib Dems. We will only see off their challenge by rebranding Labour as a radical alternative genuinely to the left of the Lib Dems.

Tony Blair needs to consider carefully whether he can really put his heart into such a project. The comments of his allies yesterday that we must listen to the electorate's demand for tougher measures on law and order, more welfare reform and respect from youths suggest they're still fighting yesterday's battles and ironically are not offering Labour the modernisation it now needs as a force of the centre left.

The last question is the heaviest, and also the one that Tony Blair may have most personal difficulty in answering frankly. On election night, he recognised that Iraq had been a divisive issue but expressed the hope that "now we can

unite again". But the problem this formula ducks is that Iraq is universally seen as his personal responsibility. How, therefore, does he imagine that the millions of voters who deserted Labour over Iraq on Thursday will return while he remains as leader?

The reason why Iraq remained a livid wound in this election is that there had been no catharsis to close the account on an unpopular war based on false intelligence and launched with doubtful legality. No one who shared in the decisions ever took responsibility by resigning and some were even promoted for their part in the miscalculations. It is difficult to understand what government figures means when they say that we must listen to the message of the election if yet again there is no practical consequence to the verdict of the voters on Iraq.

Unity is an admirable political asset and Tony Blair was right to recognise the importance of rebuilding. But that leads inexorably to the toughest question he must now ask himself. Should he not make way for a new leader who does not have his close identification with the war on Iraq and therefore has a better prospect of rebuilding unity?

Tony Blair can answer all these questions confident that he has a place of honour in Labour's history. He has carried Labour's popular appeal well beyond the confines of its own heartlands and forced us to face up to the truth that efficient delivery of services is as important as the right intentions. This weekend, though, he needs to consider deeply whether the best way of safeguarding his legacy may be to do his party the final service of stepping down sooner rather than later.

- Robin Cook is Labour MP for Livingston.